

THE EMOTIONAL COMPASS OF ADHD:

MOTIVATION, SHAME, AND SELF PERCEPTION

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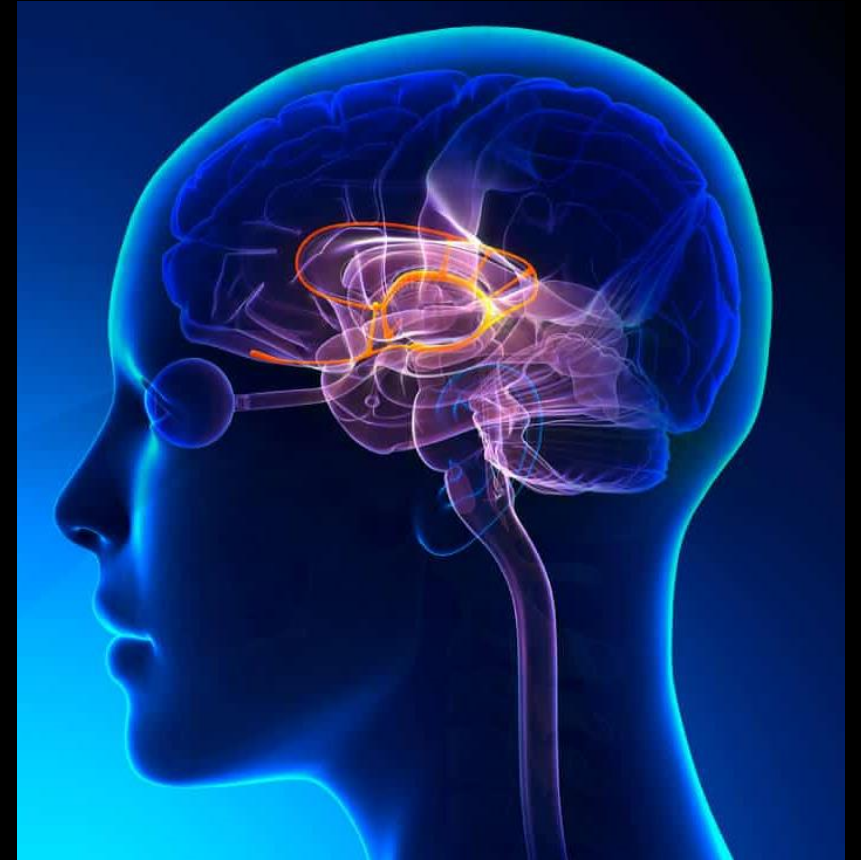


EMOTIONAL REGULATION

HOW THE BRAIN PROCESSES EMOTION, AWARENESS, AND ACTION

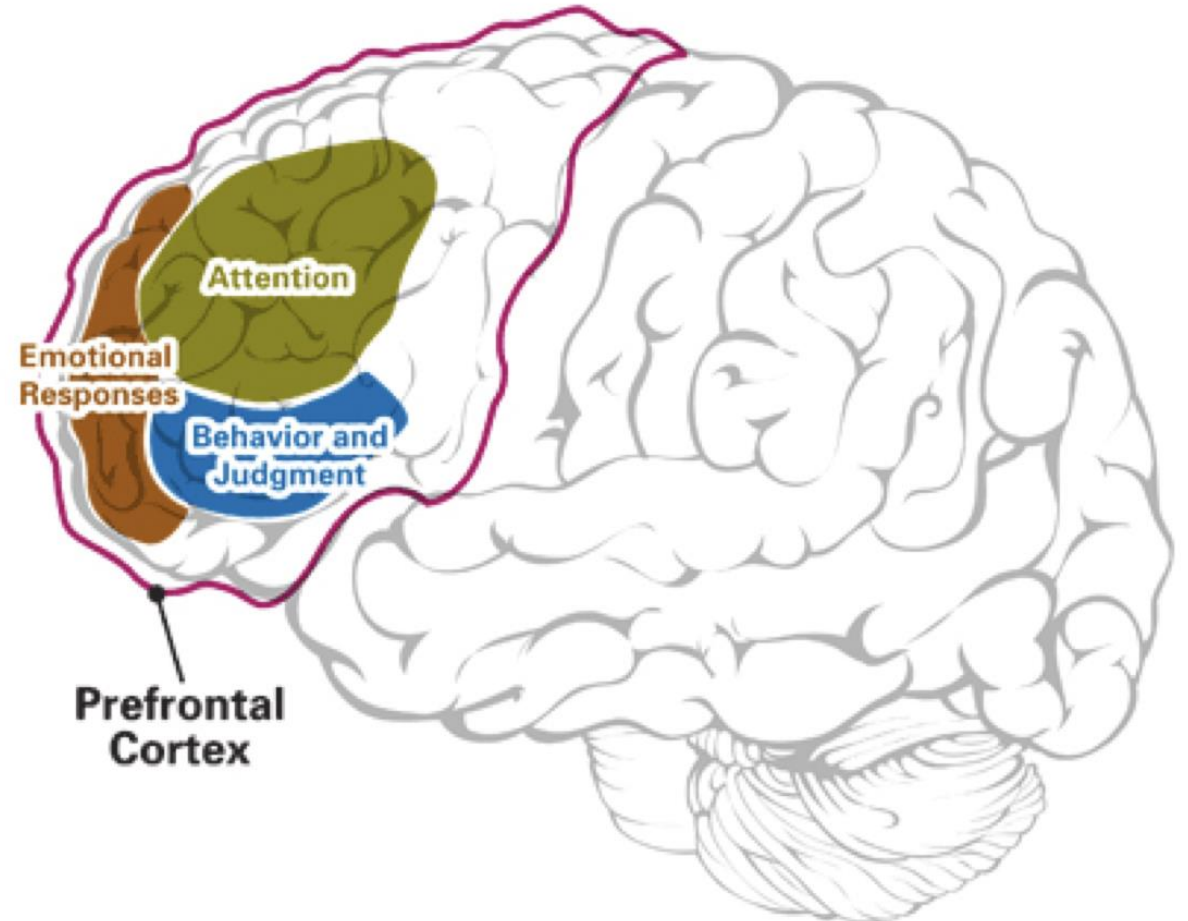
Limbic System –

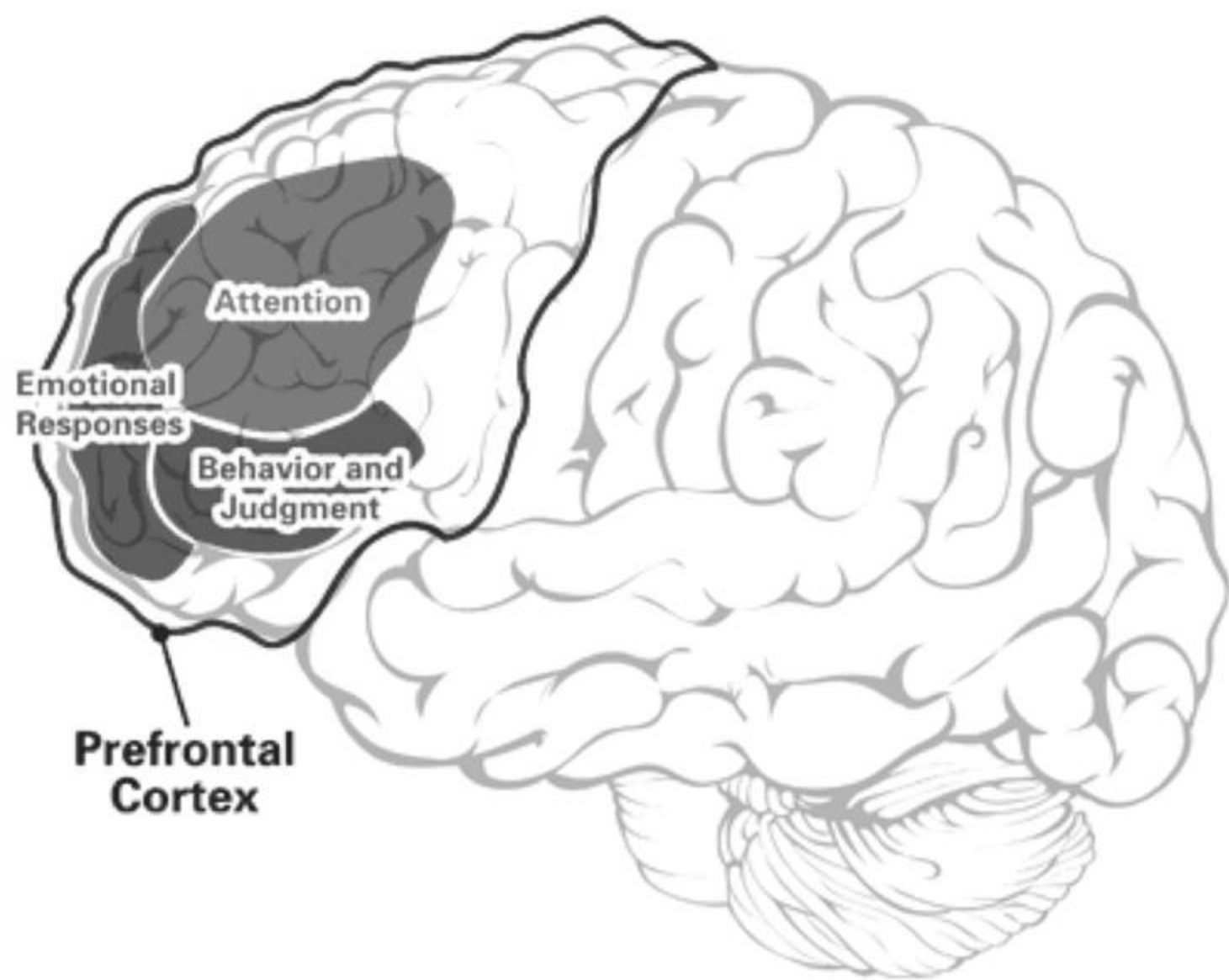
- Emotional core of the brain
- First to process sensory input
- Evaluates choices through emotional significance and motivational relevance
- Triggers fast emotional responses before rational thinking engages



➡ THEN TO THE PREFRONTAL CORTEX

- The brain's regulation and reflection center
- Mediates mood, impulse control, and decision-making
- Integrates emotional data with logic and long-term goals
- Supports personality expression and adaptive behavior





For many of us with ADHD, the brain's gating mechanism for regulating emotion does not distinguish between

DANGEROUS THREATS and MINOR PROBLEMS



Deficient Emotional Self-Regulation

- Is a central facet of ADHD that carries significant consequences.
- Is not included the disorder's diagnostic criteria.
- Research confirms the prominent role emotional dysregulation plays in ADHD's appearance and an individual's outcomes

FASTEN ON TO A FEELING

Extreme responses may be due to "flooding"

Focus on one emotion crowds out other
important information that might help solve a
problem

Many learn to hijack
their
“emotional brain”
in order to motivate
themselves



A person's hands are visible in the foreground, framing a sunset over a body of water. The hands are positioned as if holding a camera or a frame, with the fingers pointing towards the horizon. The background shows a calm lake reflecting the warm colors of the setting sun, with distant mountains under a cloudy sky. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

6 NASTY MOTIVATIONAL TRICKS

Anxiety

Avoidance

Anger

Procrastination

Shame

Self-loathing



We develop an external compass

How Chronic Self-Doubt Develops

- Years of missed expectations or inconsistent results chip away at confidence.
- Each setback reinforces the belief: *“Maybe I’m not capable after all.”*
- Over time, effort starts to feel risky — because failure feels personal.



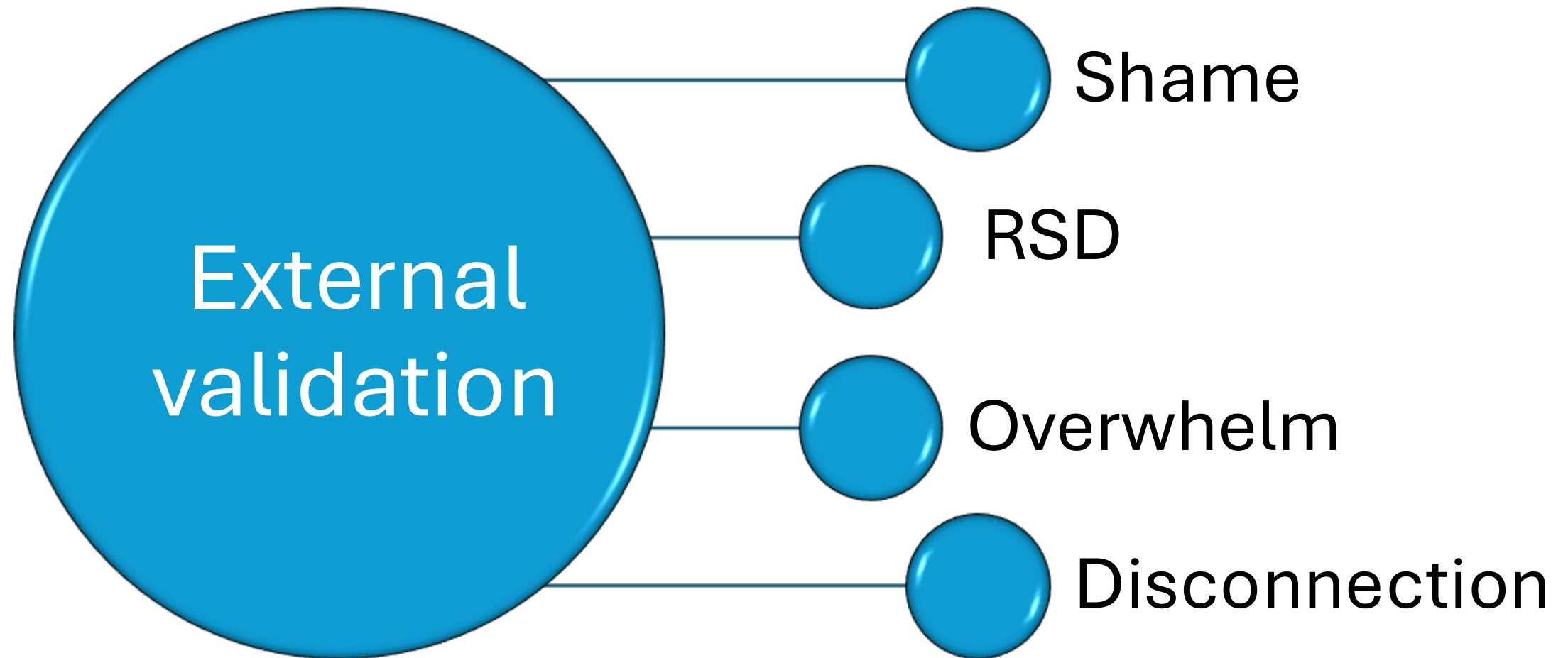
Looking Outward for Approval

- When our internal confidence feels shaky, we begin to scan for cues from others.
- “*Was that okay?*” becomes a quiet background loop.
- External feedback replaces internal trust — other people’s approval becomes the measure of “good enough.”



Coping Through Masking and People-Pleasing

- To avoid criticism or disappointment, we hide, over-apologize, or perform.
- We mirror others' expectations instead of expressing our own.
- It looks like competence on the outside — but it's driven by fear on the inside.



THE COST

- Emotional exhaustion and burnout.
- A blurred sense of identity — “*Who am I when I’m not performing?*”
- Life becomes about managing impressions, not living authentically.

That doesn't just affect how we
feel — it shapes how we see
ourselves.

It rewrites our self-image from
the outside in.

Many adults with ADHD have
identities built around *cop*ing
rather than *cho*osing.

RECONNECT WITH YOUR VALUES

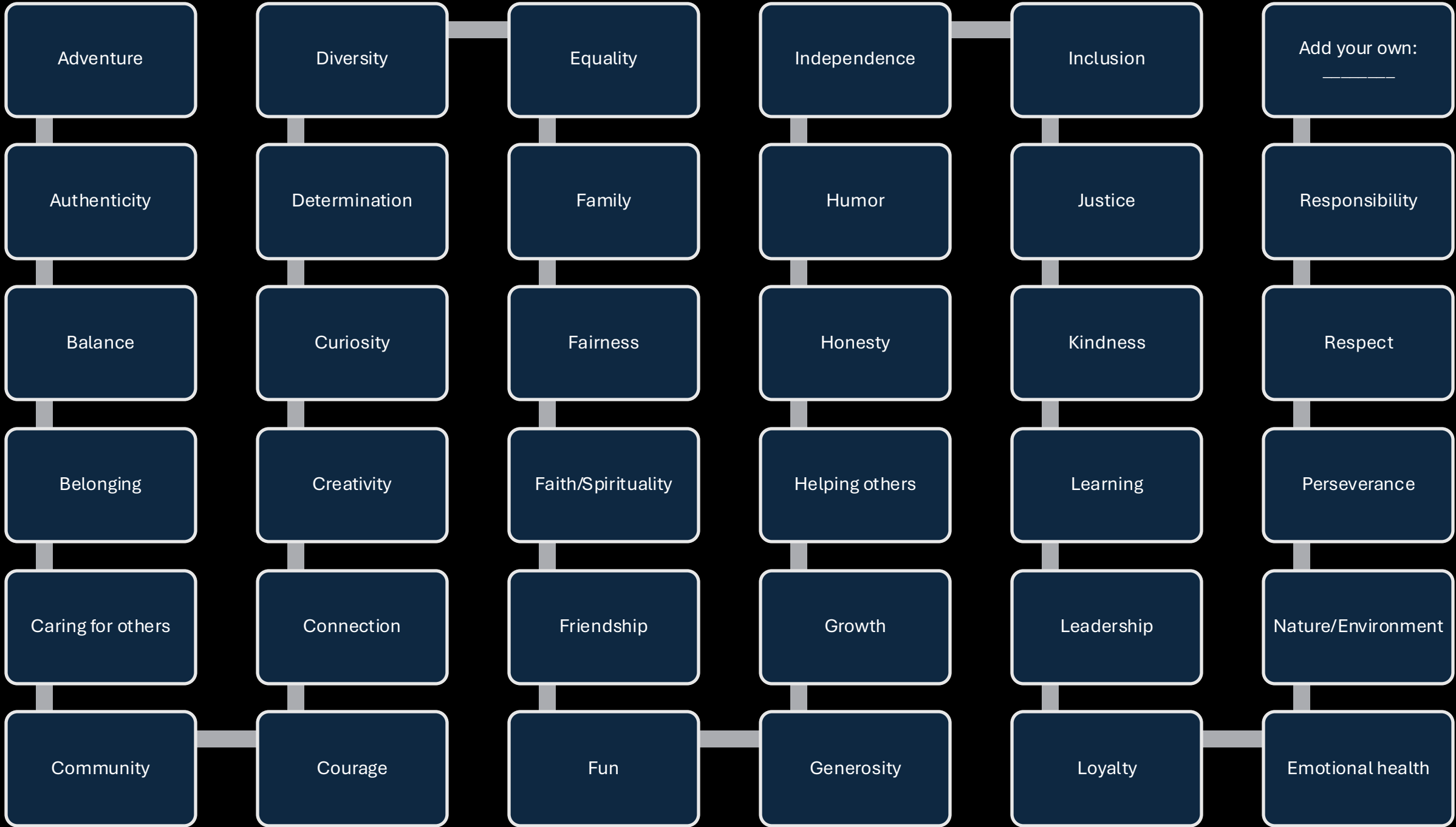


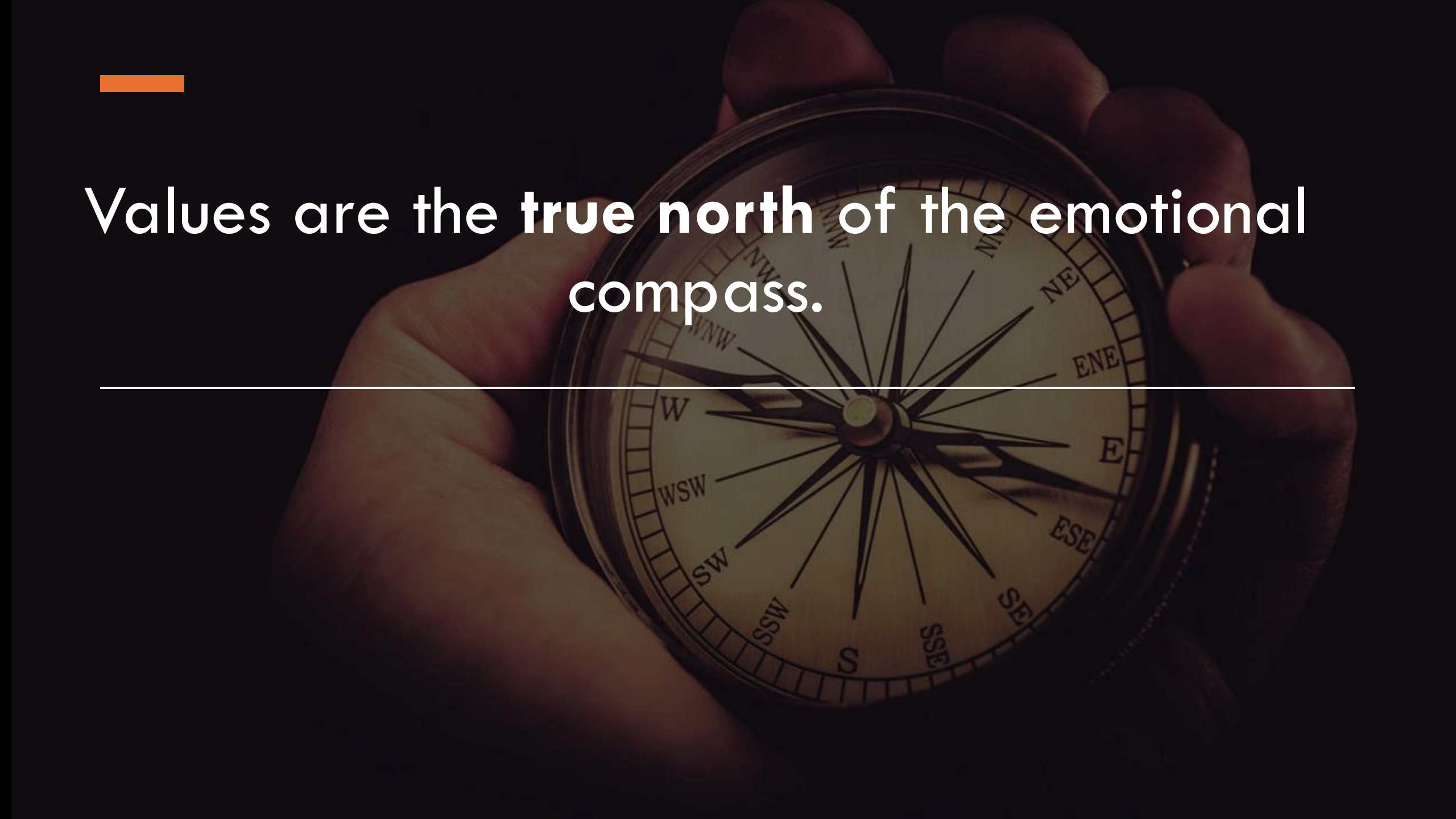
Values are the principles that guide how you want to *show up* in the world.



VALUES DIFFER FROM FEELINGS

- Feelings change moment to moment.
- Values remain steady — like a compass that still points north in a storm.
- Values give stability when emotions pull in different directions.



A hand holding a vintage compass with the text "Values are the true north of the emotional compass." overlaid. The compass face is visible, showing cardinal and intercardinal directions. The background is dark, and the text is in a clean, white, sans-serif font. A thin white horizontal line is positioned below the text.

Values are the **true north** of the emotional compass.

You can't always control the wave of emotion —
but you can choose which compass you steer by.

Pause. Breathe once — enough to create space.

Name. “I’m hurt / anxious / embarrassed.”

Choose. “What matters more than being right or perfect right now?”

Act. Do one value-aligned thing — a calm tone, a boundary, a repair.

Example: Client 1 - valued integrity

Driven by Emotion or Shame (Losing the Compass)

Hide it, deflect, or overexplain out of fear of judgment

Guided by Values (True North)

Admit a mistake, take responsibility.



Example: Client 2 - valued compassion

Driven by Emotion or Shame (Losing the Compass)

- Replay the moment, criticize yourself for not being “better.”

Guided by Values (True North)

Offer yourself grace for being human.



Example: Client 3 - valued connection

Driven by Emotion or Shame (Losing the Compass)

Withdraw, mask, or try to “earn” back approval.

Guided by Values (True North)

Reach out to repair after a misunderstanding



Step 1: Pause and Notice

Create a small space between the feeling and the reaction.

Step 2: Name What You're Feeling

No judgment — just awareness.

Step 3: Ask Yourself

This question shifts the brain from defense to direction.

Step 4: Take One Small Action

Choose something that reflects that value

Values don't erase emotions.
They *orient* them.